

CHE!

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Another Episode in the Continuing Canonization of Guevara. / by Pete Hamill

Orig.
under
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"Give a thought once in a while to this little soldier of fortune of the twentieth century."—Che Guevara, Farewell Letter to his Parents, 1967.

The column of olive-uniformed men moved slowly along the edge of the canefield, following the erratic path of a small stream. The weather was heavy and tropical; away off, dark clouds gathered in the mountains, threatening rain. The men had automatic weapons slung on their shoulders, and seemed sluggish with fatigue. They were obviously guerrilla fighters on a long march. Suddenly, the one in front—the one with scraggly beard, long black hair and black beret—looked behind him at the sky. He shouted something and the men flattened against the earth, while the waters of the stream were raked with machine-gun fire.

"That's fine, that's beautiful," shouted a wiry, gray-haired man named Richard Fleischer. "That's the take. And let's wrap for the day. The rain should be here any minute now."

The canefield was just outside Manati, a small town in Puerto Rico, about thirty miles from the glittering capital of San Juan, and we were watching another episode in the canonization of Ernesto Che Guevara. Che had been dead for a year, but the process had not even slowed down: Book followed book, magazine article followed magazine article, people roamed from Argentina to Cuba to Bolivia to search out details of Guevara's life. And now, at a cost of \$6 million, 20th Century-Fox was making a film called *Che!* The exclamation point was probably added by the stockholders.

It didn't really matter that Richard Fleischer, who was directing the film, had just come off a pair of movies called *The Boston Strangler* and *Dr. Dolittle*. And it didn't seem to matter that Che, the Argentine revolutionary, was being played by Omar Sharif, who was an Egyptian. (What the hell, he also played Nicky Arnstein, a Jewish gambler, in *Funny Girl*.) Or that Fidel Castro was being played by Jack Palance, from Latimer, Pennsylvania, who once played one of the baddest bad guys ever seen in *Shane*. And it really didn't matter that Sy Bartlett, who was producing the picture, was a man who started in the movie business by writing *The Road to Zanzibar* and moved on, during the war years, to become Chief of Combat Intelligence for Air Force General Curtis LeMay. There might be some cynics wondering how a man who used to work for George Wallace's Vice-Presidential campaign found himself the driving force in the production of a film about a Marxist revolutionary. But *Che!* is the Che Industry, and there is a Che Industry because there is money to be made off the corpse. In 1967, when he was murdered after capture in Bolivia, Che Guevara has become a bizarre mixture of Bolívar, Zapata and James Dean and Cortez and Lewis and Clark and Charlie Parker, part soldier of fortune, part melancholy artist, part humanitarian, the Latin Robert Jordan gone to die, telling all the rest of us never to send for whom the bell tolls. If it is absurd to see the fine ironic face sharing wall space with posters of W. C. Fields, well, we have learned to live with it.